

# Sophocles' *Philoctetes*: the cure on Lemnos

James Morwood

One of the most remarkable features of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is the playwright's decision to make its central figure so revolting. In the tragedy's opening speech, Odysseus tells us that he dumped him on the island of Lemnos because 'his foot was oozing pus' and 'he kept filling the whole camp with his wild shouts and screams'. Soon Neoptolemus spots Philoctetes' rags hung out to dry 'caked in a kind of discharge'. ('Ugh!' adds Judith Affleck here, in her lively translation.) When an agonizing attack hits him, his foot seeps 'hot, bloody pus'. He stinks. Dressed in beast skins, he has become wild himself (226, 1321). He is the first to admit that it is disgusting to be with him. Yet despite all this, we admire him.

This is all the more remarkable when we consider that after Euripides in his now-lost *Telephus* made his hero dress in rags in order to win a cure for a leg wound, he was mercilessly mocked by Aristophanes. Why then did Sophocles – so it seems – escape the comic dramatist's ridicule? One answer to this may lie in the flinty integrity of his hero and the extraordinary range and passion of his language. Another may be that Philoctetes' repulsive sickness will – so we discover as the play nears its end – ultimately be cured at Troy. Implicit in the sickness is the promise of health. Yet another answer could be that it sets a challenge to the play's characters and thus serves as a touchstone to illuminate their moral qualities. The moments when Neoptolemus establishes physical contact with the repellent Philoctetes (813, 1403) are charged with enormous emotional force as they reveal his essential goodness.

Although Philoctetes' condition is certainly grim, then, it also looks forward to a cure for him as well as offering a challenge to Neoptolemus: it plays a crucial part in the moral education of this ephebe (as Athenians termed adolescents undergoing rites of passage). This balance between the negative and the positive is reflected in the depiction of the island of Lemnos on which the play is set. Rocky and mountainous – it has its own volcano, Mt Mosychlus – it is unpopulated and offers no anchorage. An inhospitable location. Yet here Philoctetes lives in a user-friendly cave which catches the sun in winter and is well-ventilated in summer. Close by, there is a spring of drinking water. And on the island grows the pain-killing herb which brings the damaged hero relief. The ambivalent nature of the island is reflected in its position right at the heart of the Aegean sea midway between Greece and Troy.

This ambivalence makes Sophocles' Lemnos the perfect location for the moral testing and education of its characters. Will they leave the island as good or bad men? Odysseus is revealed as utterly ineducable, his rotten cynicism appearing far more repulsive than Philoctetes' physical degradation. Homer's cunning hero is transformed into a self-seeking manipulator who will stop at nothing to get his way. On the other hand, Neoptolemus' day on Lemnos leads him from callow adolescence to an understanding of what it really means to be a man. And perhaps even Philoctetes wins through to a fuller understanding – with considerable assistance from Heracles, the god who appears in the final scene (as a *deus ex machina*, a 'god from the machine'). Through the close emotional bond he forms with Neoptolemus, he learns that no man – not even a characteristically unsociable Sophoclean hero – is an island. There is, I feel, a fondness in the wonderfully unsentimental lyrics with which

he bids farewell to Lemnos:

*But now, o streams and Lycian spring,  
I am leaving you, I am leaving at last –  
I had thought I would never depart.  
Farewell, o sea-girt land of Lemnos!  
Send me ungrudgingly on my way with fair voyage,  
to whatever place great Destiny conveys me,  
and my friends' advice, and the all-conquering  
god who has brought these things to pass.*

What a contrast with the terrible cries of pain that have earlier reverberated through the play. He has now come to terms with his past and discovered that he has a future. Psychologically he is cured. His physical cure will follow.

Two millennia later, in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare used an island in the same kind of way as a setting for his characters' education and self-discovery. (Interestingly enough, it is one of the only two of his plays that limit their action to a single day as most Greek tragedies, including *Philoctetes*, do.) 'In a poor isle,' one of the characters exclaims near the end, 'all of us [have found] ourselves.' And Prospero's rough but benevolent magic makes him an equivalent of Sophocles' Heracles. In fact, not all of *The Tempest*'s characters can be included in the happy ending, but for most of the older generation the wounds of the past have been healed and the young have been educated to face the wide world away from the island. So in *Philoctetes*, Odysseus cannot progress beyond the prison of his mean-spirited cynicism, but Philoctetes and Neoptolemus have been transformed and enriched. When they leave the island, they have found themselves, and perhaps it is in the generosity of their new, cured identities that true heroism, as this play defines it, lies.

*James Morwood teaches at Wadham College, Oxford.*